



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Troubling Detail

Citation for published version:

Wyatt, J 2010, 'Troubling Detail: Mother, Gender, and Care in Carolyn Ellis' Revision', *International Review of Qualitative Research*, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 513-517.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

International Review of Qualitative Research

Publisher Rights Statement:

©Wyatt, J. (2010). Troubling Detail: Mother, Gender, and Care in Carolyn Ellis' Revision. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 2(4), 513-517.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Troubling Detail

Mother, Gender, and Care in Carolyn Ellis' *Revision*

Jonathan Wyatt

Abstract At the end of 2008, Carolyn Ellis published *Revisions*, in which she revisits and reflects upon previously published work. This paper was originally written for a "Reader meets Author" Plenary at the 5th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, May 22nd–23rd, 2009, held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.¹ Each member of the panel was invited to choose a passage, comment and raise questions (particularly about writing) for Carolyn Ellis to respond to. The paper focuses on the chapter where Ellis returns to two papers about her then ageing mother.

It's a beautiful Saturday in May, 2009.

The fourth-floor room is cramped. As people enter—there are seats for no more than thirty—additional chairs are brought in and we shuffle forward. I'm at the front and my knees now touch the wooden table, where Carolyn Ellis and Laurel Richardson greet people as they approach. There are good natured comments about how come this session, which was always going to attract a crowd, could have been scheduled to take place in a cupboard.

It's time to start and still more arrive. I decide that sitting on the floor would be helpful. A few others think the same. I squat in the corner, behind the desk, out of sight.

We're here to discuss Carolyn Ellis' new book (Ellis, 2008). Laurel Richardson wrote to me in December to ask if I would do this and I readily agreed. However, my anxiety grew as the weeks passed without receiving the book from the publishers. What if it didn't arrive in time for me to read it before May? I began waking in the night remembering undergraduate tutorials that I had attempted to bluff my way through having not read the books. "What do you understand of Elliott's view of women through her portrayal of Dorothea in Middlemarch, Jonathan?" or "How successful do you find Dickens' use of two narrator voices in Bleak House? Jonathan, you haven't said much. Would you care to comment?" It would have served me better had I got beyond chapter one.

Eventually, Revision arrived from Left Coast Press, on the same day as the copy I'd ordered in panic from Amazon. I've read the whole book. No bluffing needed today. I've enjoyed focusing on Carolyn's stories about her mother.

We're settled. Laurel introduces the session and how it's going to work. She is the first of the four of us on the panel to speak to the book, inviting Carolyn to comment on the opening paragraphs. She doesn't read a paper but makes remarks and raises questions, which Carolyn takes up enthusiastically.

Sat in my corner, I suddenly worry that I have written too much and that my paper will take too long. I shall read quickly.

Carolyn finishes her response to Laurel. Laurel turns to me.

I unfold and stand, refer to the Bleak House anxieties and begin.

I'm going to read to you a brief excerpt from Chapter 8, where Carolyn is narrating a discussion with students concerning the two stories about her mother that come earlier in the chapter. The passage begins with Carolyn's 'mini-lecture' (as she puts it) where she is responding to a question from a male student about whether we lose control of our stories when we tell them to others. The student, Matt, acknowledges "I don't want to be that vulnerable." Up to the point where the passage begins, Carolyn has been explaining how, yes, we do lose control to an extent and, yes, we have to decide what we tell and what we don't, but that maybe we burden ourselves too much with stories that we feel we have to keep secret. Maybe vulnerability is not so bad. Maybe we'll learn from others' responses; maybe they'll learn from us. Sharing our stories helps us to get involved. She tells her class — and I like this — "I think we can learn from each other and the silences we carry." (Ellis, 2008, p.188) What's more, stories are not fixed; they change in the telling and re-telling:

"Did you find yourself in Maternal Connections?" (Carolyn asks her class.)

Matt's hand shoots up. "I didn't really see myself in your situation because my mom is still in her forties. Besides when she does get old, my sisters will be the ones taking care of her. I guess your story was interesting, but I was shocked that you described your mother's body in so much detail."

"The vivid detail was the power of it for me," says Tracy. "It's real. That's what bodies are like. It's like Professor Ellis was saying, Why do we feel we have to hide these details?"

"Matt, I'm wondering why you assume your sisters will take care of your mother?" Tim asks.

"I just always assumed that would be the way it was, that girls should take care of their mothers. I never questioned it," says Matt, looking slightly puzzled.

"Now, perhaps, you will," Joyce says to Matt and gives Tim a thumbs-up. (Ellis, 2008, p.189)

I first read this chapter in *Revision* while travelling to see my mother. I go by train, on Saturdays, once a month. She lives on her own since my father died six years ago. My sister and brother live nearby.

Carolyn's open, intimate writing reminds me that I have never written about my mother. I didn't write about my father until after he died. My mother will regularly quip, usually in front of my sister as well as me:

"Am I going to have to wait until I die before you write about me?"

I always reply "Yes, probably," which sounds harsh but makes her laugh.

And at other times she'll say:

"I don't think that you'll write about me like you write about your dad. There aren't any stories like there are with him."

I associate train journeys with hope. I used to drive but these monthly train journeys to see my mother, on quiet weekend mornings, alone in the carriage, as the low sun casts long shadows across dewy fields, fill me with optimism.

Carolyn's stories of her mother in this book, *Maternal Connections and With Mother/With Child*, originally published in 1996 and 2001 respectively, were new to me. Many readers will know them. The first brief story describes Carolyn's caring for her mother during an episode when her mother was hospitalised. We hear, for example, how Carolyn helps her mother bathe and then accompany her back to the hospital bed. It is detailed and precise. Carolyn describes her mother's involuntary bowel movements — "eyebrows raised as though she is asking my permission and apologising at the same time" — Carolyn holding her, touching her all the while, reassuring her.

The second, later, account is of Carolyn telling the story of reading to her mother some writing that she has done about visiting and caring for her mother at home. Told in the continuous present there is both a 'now' story, italicised, and the story she is reading to her mother. One moment we are in the story of her mother lying in her La-Z-Boy chair, pulling the walker to her, struggling to stand, and speeding (as Carolyn jokes) to the kitchen, and at another we are in the same room, with Carolyn and her mother, in a different present, as Carolyn is reading this writing (about the getting up and walking to the kitchen) to her mum as she sits in the same La-Z-Boy chair. We hear how her mother is responding to the story and are privy to Carolyn's internal commentary about what she is editing for her mother's ears.

My questions for Carolyn relate to two issues — the details that she chooses to tell and not tell and the area of gender, care, and writing. They are, of course, related.

I am troubled by the bodily details that also trouble Matt. Matt (with whom I identify closely) says he is shocked that Carolyn describes her mother's body in so much detail, but Tracy says it is the vivid detail that holds for her the power of the

story. Why hide them, she asks? There is other writing of Carolyn's in the book, where such details, as here, are raw, uncompromising. This is my stuff, I realise, a certain male, uptight Englishness perhaps. However, what's most interesting to me about both Carolyn's writing about her mother and her writing elsewhere in the book is: What are her thought processes when it comes to writing down onto the page in the first instance, just for her own eyes and ears? Carolyn and others have written elsewhere about the ethics of this (and ethics are here in this chapter of the book — Carolyn never showed her mother the first story about her mother's stay to hospital). However, I am interested more in the writing process, the extent to which she finds that, for example, she censors herself — the things she can't bring herself to write, even though, as she writes here, it's good not to stay silent. Another slant on this would be, what details about her mother did she not write? Is it possible to get hold of that? And if so, why? What goes on internally? What yardsticks does she use?

Secondly, and maybe predictably, I'm drawn to the gendered angle of the discussion between Matt, Tracy and Tim. Matt says he doesn't see himself caring for his mother; his sisters will be doing that. Tim asks him why he assumes that this will be how it will be. Matt responds that he'd just always made this assumption. Joyce says now perhaps he will consider that it might be him as well as his sisters.

It is not likely to be me caring for my ageing mother. It will be my sister. It was not I who assisted my father's most "intimate care" in his later years but my sister. And if I had I could not have written about it. (Though now I just have, even if only fleetingly and euphemistically.) I remember an incident when I found myself washing the grimy feet of an institutionalised, sad, neglected young man. I remember the intimacy of the caring gesture.

Maybe I could do it.

Maybe I could write about it.

Does Carolyn see her story of looking after her mother as a woman's story? Only a woman's story? I know that this is probably unanswerable. And does the writing of such care, or the prospect of writing of it, make such care possible?

At the end of our Saturday together my mother and I part at the station in the village where she lives. We stand on the platform for the few minutes before the train arrives, as I clutch the pot of daffodil buds that she bought this morning for my wife, Tessa. She admonishes me for folding the carrier bag too tightly over the daffodil heads as I try to disguise from public view that I am a man carrying a plant pot. I step onto the empty carriage and take a seat near the window. We blow kisses. I stick out my tongue, which makes her smile and reciprocate. The train shunts. I look back at her as it draws away. No longer able to see me, she turns to walk to her car, her gait a dignified shuffle.

I remain standing for a moment then return to my place on the floor. Carolyn picks up my questions. In turn, Julie White then speaks about Carolyn's chapter on 9/11 and, finally, Norman Denzin, complaining that his fellow panellists have taken the three parts of the book that he might have commented upon, improvises eloquently about the associations between the opening scene of the book — Carolyn's dream of being in the shower, partially clothed, while her graduate students, seemingly oblivious, mill around — and iconic cinema shower scenes. Carolyn is temporarily, and delightfully, floored. The audience — taken equally by surprise — laughs with her and discussion ensues.

References

Ellis, C. (2008). *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.

About the Author

Jonathan Wyatt is Head of Professional Development at the University of Oxford, UK, and a counsellor in NHS primary care. He completed his doctorate at the University of Bristol in 2008, having produced, with Ken Gale, a joint dissertation on collaborative writing and subjectivity, which is now a book, *Between the Two: A Nomadic Inquiry into Collaborative Writing and Subjectivity*, published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. He is interested in the performative writing and autoethnography of life and loss.